

TEXTS  
AND  
TEACHERS

OPENING  
THE DOOR TO  
HERMENEUTICAL RE

# THE PRACTICE GUIDE

CLASSROOM TOOLS FOR  
SACRED TEXT SCHOLARSHIP

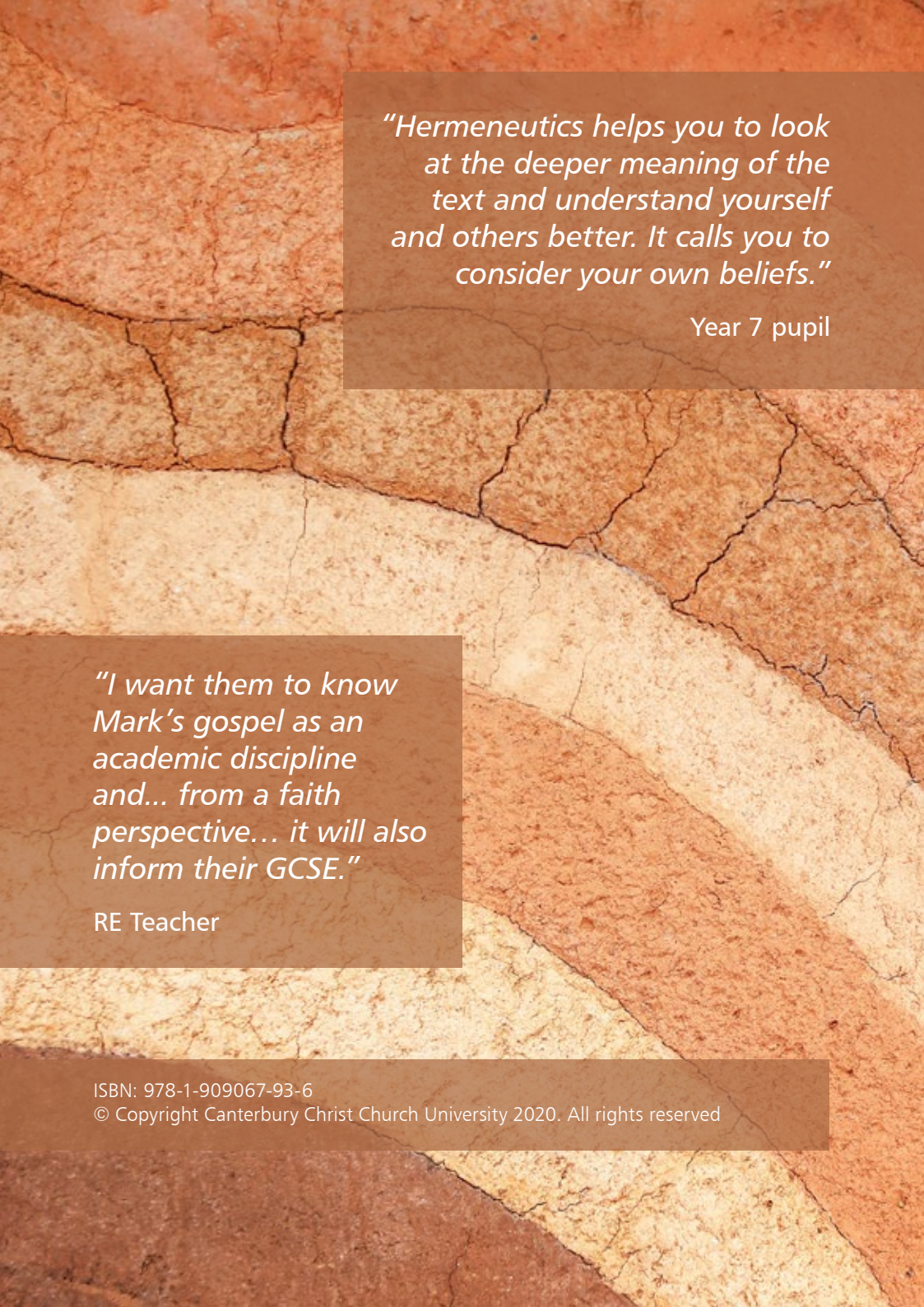
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*"Hermeneutics helps you to look at the deeper meaning of the text and understand yourself and others better. It calls you to consider your own beliefs."*

Year 7 pupil

*"I want them to know Mark's gospel as an academic discipline and... from a faith perspective... it will also inform their GCSE."*

RE Teacher

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# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We recommend reading this document together with the 'Texts and Teachers Findings Report', *Opening the Door to Hermeneutical RE* (available online at [www.canterbury.ac.uk/nicer/hermeneutics](http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/nicer/hermeneutics)), as well as the linked Bible Society resources.

The sections contain different kinds of information which together form a development programme for teachers who want to know more about developing a hermeneutically shaped curriculum. It could also be used by resource developers seeking to develop new materials framed by hermeneutics and could also be of use for those involved in developing examinations and questions that permit students to explore their hermeneutical knowledge and competence.

*Where to start* sets out the broader educational case for a more hermeneutical approach in the subject. It sets out a pedagogical way of thinking about this approach and how to think about the material and the learner.

*Introducing hermeneutics* is a concise accessible introduction to the hermeneutical aspects in the curriculum, disciplinary, the question of meaning, and the broader educational and academic aims of hermeneutical RE. It also introduces some key ideas from Christian sacred text scholarship and a series of key questions. This sets the scene for the kind of classroom experience students will be drawn into, through questions.

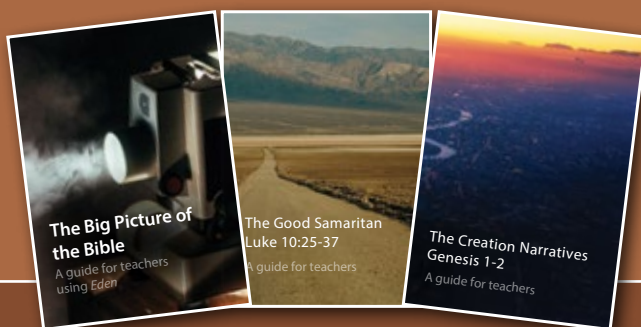


*Hermeneutics and texts sacred to Muslims, especially the Qur'an*, written by Dr Panjwani, introduces some Muslim hermeneutical thought to explore teaching Muslim sacred texts.

*LAaSMO: a hermeneutical pedagogy*, by Dr Carswell, is an introduction to a classroom approach to investigating Biblical texts in the classroom, reporting on the trials of this approach from Carswell's own work, and also sharing an example of some work from a student.

*The hermeneutical book group*, by Ms Clemmey, sets out the ongoing professional support given to the participant teachers and the academic resources they were introduced to, with some of the key topics of debate.

Finally we include information about some of the resources provided by Bible Society to support the project.



## BIBLE SOCIETY RESOURCES

Mike Otter (Bible Society) gave a talk to the participants on The Creation Narratives, Genesis 1-2 (2020, Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society) which is available for free download from this website.

[educationresources.biblesociety.org.uk/teachers-guides](https://educationresources.biblesociety.org.uk/teachers-guides)

It is designed to give clear explanation about Christian beliefs and concepts and insights into related Bible passages, including different interpretations. Each booklet also includes some sample resources to use with school students.









# BACKGROUND

**Should schools help students become good interpreters of religion, worldviews, and sacred texts? Should they help students explore what it means to be a sacred text scholar?**

This guide is for all those interested in teaching sacred texts, in particular the Bible and texts sacred to Muslims including the Qur'an. This project was part of *REsearch 7*, a Culham St Gabriel's initiative. Academic papers about the project will be forthcoming in research journals and monographs. It took place between October 2018 and July 2019.

Many secondary pupils encounter texts in fragments, collected by topic, and used as proof texts for argumentation.<sup>1</sup> The texts themselves are rarely studied in their own terms. Currently, curriculum debates are framed by the language of powerful knowledge and disciplines, and therefore it is timely to consider a scholarly *hermeneutical* approach to connect the classroom subject to advances in understanding sacred texts. Hermeneutics is the art or science of interpretation, concerned with meaning and significance. In this project we also refer to *Sacred Text Study* and *Sacred Text Scholarship* to describe the hermeneutical aspects of disciplinary study, especially in relation to studies of the Bible in Christian faith, and the Qur'an and Hadith in Muslim faith.

Anthony C. Thiselton, English Anglican priest, theologian, and leading Scripture scholar, observed that when his students studied hermeneutics their understanding and approach to sacred texts changed.<sup>2</sup> The hypothesis of this project was that exposure to hermeneutics and sacred text scholarship might improve classroom confidence, competence, practice and understanding.

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- 1 Bowie, R. and Coles, R. (2018) 'We reap what we 'sew': perpetuating Biblical illiteracy in new English Religious Studies exams and the proof text binary question', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 40:3, 277-287.
  - 2 Thiselton, A. C. (1992) *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Zondervan, 1992.

# WHERE TO START

Identify where you can make changes. Key Stage Two is an opportunity to explore different questions that can be asked of texts, and learn something of the different kinds of texts that are considered sacred. Key Stage Three is where you can introduce the discipline of text interpretation, developing specific habits for handling texts. In Key Stage Four, these habits can be applied to texts on the GCSE specification. Wherever possible, study longer texts. The following principles help guide planning:

1. **The educational aim** of this is to give the students some experience of sacred text scholarship so that they may see inside the process of making meaning within a religious tradition, as an introduction to the art and science of introduction.
2. **What a text says.** You need to make space for hermeneutical questioning which relates to the philosophical ideas that are present within hermeneutics. Such questions may include: What can a text be thought to say? What meanings may a text be hospitable to? How is there a connection between the meaning given a text by the reader and the original author? How is a text meaningful for contemporary faith communities? This can relate to religious ideas such as revelation and authority.
3. **The centrality of text in the knowledge.** It is suggested that the study of sacred text is placed front and centre in this unit work, rather than using text for other things (such as ethical issues). As such it is about studying longer passages (not quotes in fragments), and dealing directly with the kind of text being studied (including the type in the case of the Bible where there are multiple forms of text). This requires knowledge about the form of the text and its structure and vocabulary, and knowledge about the different ways a text is read or engaged by a faith community.



4. **Commentaries and knowledge about interpretations.** It will require that you familiarise yourself with commentaries on the texts you choose so that you know the scholarship of the passages you are interested in. This becomes part of the knowledge that the students need exposure to. They may never have seen a Bible commentary, or a Study Bible. They may not be aware of debates surrounding interpretation. Some guidance on this is given in this document.
5. **Differing contexts and interpretations.** If possible, find examples of how communities in different contexts reread sacred texts. A famous example in Bible debates is the different ways poor and rich Christians have seen the Good Samaritan. Another example would be to consider faith communities experiencing conflict and those in peaceful prosperity.
6. **The learner as rereader.** In addition to the study of what a text says to faith communities and how those communities discern those meanings, the pupils themselves will begin to see things in the text from their own perspective and situation. Scholars of readerly hermeneutics give space for this and some theological ideas require it (such as concepts of revelation that include an ongoing dimension, not just a fixed and historic dimension). What a text says to them in their situation is a focus of study. This can be managed within the classroom by giving space for questions and the students' own reflections on what the text says to them.

*The scholarship of sacred texts seeks to find meaning through the study of the words, their contexts and their readers.*

# INTRODUCING HERMENEUTICS

by Professor Robert A. Bowie

**Hermeneutics is the theory of the art or science of interpretation. It is in many fields such as art, music, literature and philosophy. It is bound up with the role of storytelling that some suggest was a vital part of the cognitive development and evolution of human beings.**

Biblical interpretation, the study of sacred texts, is a hermeneutical form of scholarship that has evolved over millennia. The question of interpretation is referred to within the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Bible contains many examples where one book responds to another book.

The scholarship of sacred texts seeks to find meaning through the study of the words, their contexts and their readers. It explores norms for that process and is interested in how each of these things provides significance for people. Language type, author and audience, practices of interpretation and reading, communities of reading, are all part of hermeneutics. Reading the text can mean reading but also, encountering, engaging and experiencing.

An underpinning idea of this project is that religious education should aim to educate students to become responsible interpreters of religion through responsible hermeneutics in the classroom.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Pett, S. and Cooling, T. (2018) 'Understanding Christianity: exploring a hermeneutical pedagogy for teaching Christianity', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 40:3, 257-267.



**Such an approach acknowledges we are living in an interpreted world, and we are interpreting creatures within that world and how a teacher plans their lessons makes a difference to the process of interpretation pupils associate with the study of religion and worldviews.**

## **1. KNOWING, CURRICULUM AND DISCIPLINARITY**

Hermeneutics is about knowing. Knowing entails making sense of the world around us, how we read the world and, over time and in different situations, reread things. The kind of 'knowing' that goes on is part of sense making and interpretation. It identifies contours, practices, what is revealed and why.

RE contains several ways of knowing, several disciplines. One idea common in educational debate today, is that we should educate students not only in the material that disciplines engage, but also in the different ways of knowing that disciplines offer which organises that material into something meaningful.

Disciplinary knowledge (the practice of ways of knowing) is key to more advanced learning. Education is not just 'stuff' accumulation but disciplined practice and achieving proficiency in the application of that practice. The 'stuff' of study does matter but the discipline has a relationship with the 'stuff' and the practices of knowing in that relationship shape the classroom encounters between teacher, pupil and 'stuff'. If a student only ever encounters sacred texts as quotes in arguments, this is likely to frame how they perceive sacred texts altogether.

The idea that RE aims to educate students to become responsible interpreters of religion could mean the scholarly practices of handling text hermeneutically. In the classroom, the approach to the discipline and the subject matter chosen as a focus, each have consequences for the pedagogy, and the habits students are encouraged to adopt in classroom activities.

## **2. WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?**

How people of faith read their sacred texts often illuminates much about their approach to faith and differences within religion, and in Christianity explains denominational differences.

Meaning has multiple layers that attract significance or are viewed differently in people. These multiple layers are essential in the study of sacred texts in general, and in particular the Bible. This is particularly true with the Bible which contains a selection of quite different types of text, following different rules of composition and structure, as well as being made in different periods.

Texts within the Bible include law books, histories, song and poetry, prophetic texts, letters, apocalyptic narratives and in the Christian tradition Gospel, which is a unique form of text. They also interweave, respond to and reread each other. Different layers of meaning are read from these different types of text and significance can be found in many of them. These layers are described in different ways: literal (meaning historical), symbolic, moral, ultimate ways (ways that relate to a life journey). The idea that texts have these multiple meanings developed early in Christian thinking.

In religious life texts are drawn into codes, into worship and prayer forms, and into answers to ultimate questions and related to doctrines. Different people give different levels of significance to the layers of meaning. For some literal and historic matter more. For others the symbolic, spiritual and ultimate meanings are most important. Some give significance to both but in different ways, to different texts.

Practices of scholarship developed to scrutinise these ways of meaning. This is important for many aspects of life in religion and worldviews. The study of the scholarship around interpreting these different kinds of meaning have significance to how sacred texts are seen to be meaningful today. This scholarship is found in many different disciplines, not simply the study of a text.

How a text is read has shaped religions and groups within religions so there is a relationship between the different ways a sacred text is read and the different practices of particular denominations in Christianity, for example.

### 3. THE EDUCATIONAL AND ACADEMIC AIMS OF HERMENEUTICAL RE

Hermeneutics is concerned with the context of a text, as well as the text itself. The context 'wraps' around any particular text to influence meaning and significance. There are always contexts, even if unacknowledged. It is helpful to think of three kinds of contexts for the layers of meaning, but it is worth noting that they are related:

#### 3.1 Become a good reader

This is about language, type of text, author, audience and setting in which the text was first taken to be significant for the faith community. It is focused on the text and the past. Becoming proficient in these areas is to become what Umberto Eco calls a model reader.<sup>4</sup> You get good at handling the text in the ways it was handled by first authors, hearers and/or audiences.

Among Christian traditions of Bible reading and interpreting, several key features and ideas are worth noting (this list is not exhaustive):

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4 Eco, U. (1979) *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington, USA: Midlands Book, 7-11.



- The idea that the meaning of the Bible should be read by taking the book as a whole, rather than in part (as the Bible is a collection of texts gathered together as a whole by the Christian community of faith), so how texts in different parts of the Bible relate and react to one another matters.
- The idea that the Bible has different senses, different ways of being read as having meaning, including literal and spiritual senses of meaning that include, for instance, a moral dimension. This is of particular importance among Catholic approaches to Bible interpretation.
- The development of an idea held to be important among Protestant Churches, that the Bible alone is the principle source of authority.
- The idea, common in Catholic understanding, which sees revelation as coming from the Bible and tradition.
- The idea that the meaning of the Bible (in terms of revelation) is beyond the intention of the author.
- The idea that the Bible has meaning both in the time and place of authors and first audiences and also continues to speak in the present.

Questions may be asked of these principles - Is the first meaning of the text all that matters for a faith community or have new insights emerged later? Can early misreading be corrected later? This is a significant point for discussions about Liberalist and Feminist rereading of Bible passages, for instance, and more generally in the development of theological debate over time.

Some religious traditions have particular principles of good reading. Important for many Churches in Christianity is the principle that the Bible is read as a whole, not only in part, or in fragments – to avoid all meaning becoming orientated around a single text or reading of a text. Exposing students to the reading of multiple texts that reread one or another explores this.

### Questions to aid good or model reading

- What words are here, what background information is needed to decode them?
- Who wrote it and for whom was it written? (Do we know?)
- What was the setting? How do the words relate to time, history, politics, society?
- What was the place of this text in the early faith community?
- What literary shape (form) does the text take? A poem, a history, something else?
- How is one particular text read alongside other texts, or through them or despite them?

### 3.2 Become confident and knowledgeable about how sacred texts are engaged and applied

This is concerned with the rich range of activities and expressions of religious life. Faith communities and religious people engage text in quite different ways: worship/ liturgy; spirituality/prayer; ethics/social/political issues; the theological concepts; the bigger narrative picture. The process of religious reading is an important feature to have prominently covered in curricula so that these different experiences of what it means to read and make sense of sacred texts in different communities are part of the curriculum.

A single text can feature in quite different ways in different aspects of the life of faith communities: through music and art in Cathedrals or Churches; in passages used in personal prayer life; in issues about moral life; in discussions about ultimate significance such as the nature of God; and in the general story of the religion or worldview as a whole.

#### Questions to aid an understanding in how texts are engaged

- How is the text engaged and what is this like for people of faith?
- What different kinds of connection are made with texts in applying faith and worldviews to life?
- How do these questions apply in:
  - liturgy and acts of collective worship?
  - prayer and spiritual life?
  - theological contexts?
  - moral aspects of life?

### 3.3 Becoming a rereader

This is about understanding that every individual student has a place in the hermeneutical adventure and that this is part of academic study. Texts have significance and meaning for individuals (a personal sense) and collectively (a collective memory, practice or consciousness). The setting or context of the reader can lead to different perspectives. The text is interpreted through the context of the individual reader and their life story.

Relationship to the faith tradition and also to personal experience/history matters in readerly rereadings. Readers may find a spiritual significance to a meaning of a text, that speaks to the lives of the readers. They make a connection that is personal.



Sacred text scholars are concerned that meaning might be relativised to such an extent that any sense of an objective or transcendent meaning is lost. If it can mean anything, then, perhaps it means nothing! This leads to the question of whether one person's reading is more reliable or responsible than that of another.

One Christian idea is that revelation 'speaks' today, and is not simply 'archaeological' matter. Consequently, new insights are possible, and a text can speak anew.

### Questions to encourage rereadership

- What connections can you make between these words and your own life? What insights might you bring from your own situation, perspective?
- Can you identify your own tendency to read a text in certain ways, even biased ways that suit your own interests or situation?
- How does your reading of this text relate to the common readings made by faith communities?

### 3.4 Becoming skilled in reading together with others

Some scholars argue it is impossible to step outside the readerly context, but in community a shared endeavour for reading the text is important. Sacred text scholarship commonly takes place in a disciplinary community, a group of scholars with a shared commitment to disciplinary study with common approaches that are practised. It can happen in interfaith settings. It also takes place in wider public life. This can be thought of as a learning community, a school class. "What the text says to me" is a legitimate question for group discussion and this can be entirely inclusive.

One of the ongoing hermeneutical questions that continues to challenge scholars, religious communities and wider society, is the idea of the true, or correct interpretation, and whether 'my own personal' interpretation can be correct or legitimate. People of different religions and worldviews conclude different things about this which makes challenges for the classroom. Should a teacher be the person to suggest which meaning is the one that holds most significance? Should they mainly try to reflect the most significant meaning that majorities hold? This is why it is so important to bring students together in the classroom into a space where questions of sacred text scholarship are asked and thoughtfully engaged. Rather than be a repository of answers of meaning, the teacher can assist in the application of methods of reading to seek out answers. This is not restricted to answers of what religious people think, but answers about what the pupils can discern as well.

### 3.5 The educational aims together and the different kinds of significance that matter to people

Exploring how scholars have investigated good reading, engaging and applying, and rereading, form part of a disciplined approach to sacred texts study. Some might argue that the author is dead and texts have no meaning but that which a present reader gives, or that a text means one thing in one context only, and others might argue that the only meaning is that which resided in the mind of the author or the ears of the audience for whom it was written.

This is part of what is called the philosophical and literary 'death of the author' problem. This postulates that we cannot bring out an original author's meaning as we are removed from their time and context.

#### Questions for discussion and exploration in the classroom

- Where is meaning found? In the text itself, in the author's mind, the situation that shaped the text, the community that engages it, or the mind of the reader that encounters it?
- What does it mean to be a 'good' or responsible reader of the text?
- Does a text have an enduring 'stable' meaning?
- Do texts have fixed meanings or are some or all 'open' to any meaning, or are some meanings more 'authentic' than others?
- Can old texts reveal new things, beyond the thought and constraint of the author?
- Are there wrong interpretations and if so, how can they be reasonably declared wrong?
- Can words use readers? (ie when we use a word we are borrowing a term that already has meanings so our use of language is a compromise that brings meanings we might not intend).

# HERMENEUTICS AND TEXTS SACRED TO MUSLIMS, ESPECIALLY THE QUR'AN

Dr Farid Panjwani

The Qur'an carries self-consciousness about its interpretability. Surah 3, verse 7 reads, "It is He who has sent this Scripture down to you [Prophet]. Some of its verses are definite in meaning- these are the cornerstone of the Scripture- and others are ambiguous. The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguities in their attempt to make trouble..." Despite the apparent condemnation of attempts to interpret, the exercise is inevitable both because to interpret is inescapably human and because the semi-poetic language of the Qur'an, full of metaphors and analogies, invites it. Further, in this case the Qur'an divides its verses into definite and ambiguous, it does not tell us how to recognise the two different types. Hence, it is left to the reader to first decide in which category verses belong, and therefore interpret. It should thus not surprise that there emerged in Muslim history a huge corpus of commentaries of the Qur'an, known by the term Tafseer. In fact, for many Muslims, even a surface interpretation was not sufficient. They believed in and looked for deeper inner meanings. This exercise came to be called Taweel.

*The question of how people read texts and respond to them has been of great concern in Biblical Studies and in philosophy more generally, but has not been adequately addressed in Islamic Studies.*



The term tafseer has been used for the process of seeking God's intentions through systematic exploration of the text as well as for works resulting from this activity. These works are 'a record of Muslim encounter with the sacred text'<sup>5</sup> and series of attempts to carry out many tasks: to enquire into the divine intent; to reconcile apparently varied meanings; to translate Qur'anic teaching into practical guidance for Muslims; to engage in polemics and to engage in theological and legal discussions. In order to do that a Qur'anic commentary on any passage usually included the following: the place of revelation, Makkah or Madina; context of revelation (thereby historicising the text); explanation of grammatical structure; and legal and theological implications.

In the modern period, the process of interpretation continues, with an added urgency of the need to respond to issues raised by the very different material, economic, social and political contexts of the contemporary world. From the 18th century, and particularly in the 19th century, it was felt by many Muslims that there was a mismatch between the apparent message of the Qur'an and the reality of life around them. It was felt that 'Muslims needed to reassess their tradition, heritage and ways of thought in line with the newly emerging dynamic and all-too powerful knowledge, values and institutions of the West.'<sup>6</sup> A crucial part of the reassessment was to find a way to reconcile the Qur'anic ideas with the changing needs of the time. In other words, there was now a need for a self-conscious way of re-interpreting the Qur'an and much else.

In this regard, a very important hermeneutical move has been to classify elements of Qur'anic guidance that are seen as trans-historical, thus applicable at all times and places, and those that are bound by circumstances of time and space. A good example here is the tafsirs done by scholars, women and men, who claim that much of the traditional interpretation was shaped by patriarchal structures and thus should now be seen as time and space bound. As such, a work of tafsir 'occupies the space of meaning between the sacred text and the context or life-world of its commentator.'<sup>7</sup>

Though interpretation for keeping the Qur'anic vision relevant to modern times has received immense attention, the tools and methods of interpretation, that is the actual focus on hermeneutics, has been comparatively less. And, those who have paid attention to the hermeneutics of the Qur'an have often done so through the scholarly tools that emerged in western context. As Stephen Burge notes, "The question of how people read texts and respond to them has been of great concern in Biblical Studies and in philosophy more generally, but has not been adequately addressed in Islamic

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5 Taji-Farouki, S. (Ed.) (2015) *The Qur'an and its readers worldwide*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1.

6 Saeed, A. (2005) *Approaches to the Qur'an in contemporary Indonesia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3.

7 Taji-Farouki (2015), 2.

Studies.”<sup>8</sup> The need for a more self-consciously hermeneutical approach to the study of the Qur’an is being increasingly recognised. This project is a small contribution towards that aim.

In short, the idea and practice of interpretation of sacred text has been part of a part of Muslim tradition from the very beginning playing a crucial role shaping religious as well as social lives of Muslims.

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8 Burge, S. R. (2015) *The Meaning of the Word*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1.



*With a defined need to change practice at classroom level and in consultation with the three Religious Education Leaders in each junior College, LAaSMO was born.*

## **LAASMO: A HERMENEUTICAL PEDAGOGY**

Dr Margaret Carswell

Margaret Carswell is a Senior Lecturer in Religious Education at Australian Catholic University. As well as a lecturer Margaret is a consultant to schools, including a cluster of schools in the west of Melbourne where she provides professional learning opportunities, curriculum support and mentoring for Religious Education teachers and leaders. Margaret's academic interest and professional work are in the area of curriculum design and development and in particular how the Bible is presented in Religious Education. She researches and publishes in this area and is the producer of curriculum resources and innovations to support teachers. Margaret's work draws on her on-going involvement in both Australia and the United Kingdom.

The development of a tool to assist students in the Federation of Catholic Regional College, Melbourne, interpret the Bible had a long gestation and a short delivery. Working with me over the past ten years, teachers of Religious Education in the three junior Colleges (Years 7-10) in the Federation had regularly been reminded of the pitfalls of placing the Bible into theme-based units.<sup>9</sup>

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9 Carswell, M. F. (2018) 'Promoting fundamentalist belief? How Scripture is presented in three religious education programmes in Catholic primary schools in Australia and England and Wales', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 40:3, 288-297.



Professional learning about the Bible for teaching staff, the careful and deliberate introduction and contextualisation of passages found in units of work and the inclusion of student immersion days to learn about Jesus within His own context, had been part of an ongoing conversation for some time. However, the gentle process of gestation came to an end with the recognition that whatever we were doing was having little impact; like most of their peers across the Archdiocese, when formally surveyed, students in the College demonstrated high levels of literalist, fundamentalist belief in Scripture.<sup>10</sup> (Carswell, 2018). In response to this finding Catholic Education Melbourne (CEM) raised the bar and placed interpretation as a skill in their assessment framework. So, with a defined need to change practice at classroom level and in consultation with the three Religious Education Leaders in each junior College, LAaSMO was born.

LAaSMO is an acronym for a teaching tool which brings together two specific areas of learning: knowledge about the Bible and skill in its interpretation. The process begins by noting the Literary form of the chosen Bible passage, its structure and purpose and the kind of truths the form conveys. It then asks students to be aware of who scholars think were the Author and audience of the writing, and what was happening at the time it was written. In considering what the author wrote students are also directed to attend to the way the author wrote. Do they repeat words or phrases, how are dialogue and contrast used, does writing allude to previous ideas, storylines, events, do they quote from other texts and in particular, does figurative language imply that meaning is more than just what is obvious at a surface level? 'S' focuses on the world the passage is set in, within the entire text, geographically and in time. It notes the role and function of characters and highlights any cultural or religious practices present in the passage.

At this point, learning about the text, indeed, exegesis of the text ends and attention deliberately moves to what this knowledge should enable: discussion about what the author might have been trying to say to their community. Three keys, (literal props used with younger students) are provided to scaffold thinking about Meaning: what might the author have been trying to say about God, about people, about the world? And finally, how might those in Our world, people of faith or no faith, respond to this passage now?

## HAS IT WORKED?

LAaSMO is about to enter its third year of implementation. At this stage the effectiveness of LAaSMO is recorded in student work and their ability to meet curriculum standards. No formal retesting has been undertaken so whether LAaSMO has shifted student levels of fundamentalism will not be able to be determined until

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10 Carswell, M. F. (2018) 'Teaching Scripture: moving towards a hermeneutical model for religious education in Australian Catholic Schools', *Journal of Religious Education*, 66, 213-223.

they are surveyed again. A tentative indicator of some success has come from one College's Pivot data. Pivot ([www.pivotpl.com](http://www.pivotpl.com)) asks pupils about their experience of teaching and learning in each learning area. Student experience of Religious Education in the October 2019 report recorded that two of the three questions which showed the greatest positive movement concerned teachers encouraging students to share their ideas and opinions, and that teachers pushed them to think rather than just giving them the answers. It would be bold to attribute this growth in Religious Education to LAaSMO alone but a shift in culture which moves to expect interpretation, thought and point of view may account for some of the changes that students report.

Anecdotally teachers note that students whose English is not strong have experienced most difficulty with the process. This is not at all surprising. It does, however, emphasise that the ability to interpret a text is a skill on its own, one best learned within a familiar context. Coupling two new areas of learning, about the Bible and about interpretation, into one process has reduced the accessibility of LAaSMO for some students. One College delayed the introduction of the process until English teachers had worked with it in English classes to counter this.

As a general rule though, teachers report that students' ability to analyse the Bible, and then to propose what it might have meant or might mean now, has increased markedly. Students are more confident in proposing meaning and are willing to debate different thoughts and to be open to the views of others. Assessment records certainly indicate that students are meeting the standards of interpretation expected of them.

## WHAT HAS BEEN HARD?

Unsurprisingly some teachers have found the change in thinking and practice that LAaSMO has demanded more difficult than others. Moving from telling students what a passage means, to asking students what they think a passage might be saying, represents a significant risk for teaching staff. Some teachers have needed to relearn the purpose of the Bible in RE; some have needed to refine their whole understanding of the Bible. Those who managed implementation of LAaSMO well were, typically, comfortable with analysing texts, often teachers of English as well as RE. Our journey has taught us that knowledge about the Bible seems to matter less than familiarity with, and acceptance of, analytical method. Explaining the Bible as 'a message wrapped in words' and defining our role as that of 'unlocking the words to reveal the messages' has proved useful in giving expression to the culture shift LAaSMO asked for. This observation is noteworthy. The implementation of LAaSMO exposed teacher vulnerability, particularly concerning what the Catholic Church meant by calling the Bible true. Explicit rebuttal of the 'Chinese whispers' explanation of difference in authors' accounts of the same event was needed.

To this end, reference to the *Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels*<sup>11</sup> has been invaluable in helping us develop a notion of truth much more nuanced and convincing for the young inquisitive mind.

Two decisions stand out as crucial in the implementation of LAaSMO. The three colleges deliberately decided to walk the tool through with an incoming Year 7 group so that teacher support could be more directed. They also decided to review all four units that taught about the nature of the Bible and to move the one from the Year 8 curriculum into the Year 7 curriculum. While this distorted the balance of the programme slightly, bringing two units about the Bible to Year 7, it meant that students would never be asked to do something they had insufficient knowledge to undertake.

## WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The strategy is, of itself, not a work of genius. It is presented to students as a simple table; a poster on a wall, a bookmark in their Bibles. Where the genius lies, if it lies anywhere at all, it is that LAaSMO has become a verb. LAaSMO means you do something: it means that you expect to ask questions, search information, gain new insights, try ideas, compare thoughts and, finally propose meanings. It means that the Bible is presented, not solely as the instrument of the curriculum, but as a valued part of it, one that stands on its own, demanding thought. We have set in place a strategy that moves students from passive absorbers to active thinkers. More recently a precise set of skills associated with each category has been identified so that increasing complexity in the use of LAaSMO is now expected as students move from Year 7 to Year 10. One College gives certificates to students who demonstrate acquisition of skills at their level.

It must be said that the introduction of LAaSMO has not solved problems associated with the placement of the Bible in theme or topic based Religious Education, but I would argue that it has been a step towards a better approach. What is very clear though is that the inclusion of the interpretation of the Bible into the curriculum via assessment has given status to this initiative. What was a nicety before is now a necessity. The final word belongs to Amadeaus, a Year 8 student. He is an able student, but his work is not perfect. On some points it is not even correct! But it serves as an example, a road map of sorts, of what we are doing, and where we are going.

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11 Pontifical Biblical Commission (1964) *Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels* <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=1352>, Retrieved Nov 1, 2019.



Use LAa5MO to analyse the following passage from Luke's Gospel.

**Luke 10:25-37 (NRSV): The Parable of the Good Samaritan**

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

<b>L</b>	<b>Literary Form</b> What genre or literary form has the author used? What sort of truths does this form convey?	The chapter starts off as a lawyer testing Jesus, but soon changes to a parable, which is a story metaphorical story to about a topic that has a deep meaning that teaches people about ways of life and how to act like a good person.
<b>Aa</b>	<b>Author &amp; Audience</b> Who wrote this? Who did they write it for? What was happening at the time? What was life like?	This gospel story is written down by Luke who obtained his story from Paul, a disciple of Jesus and from the gospel of Mark. Luke was writing to gentiles so he replaced Jewish terms like Rabbi (found in other gospels) and to lawyers, a more universal term. Luke was trying to teach people to be compassionate and caring.
<b>S</b>	<b>Setting</b> What is the world that this passage is set in? What places, roles, people and customs are mentioned?	This is set in first century Palestine on a dangerous road. In this story, the Samaritan is the 'hero'. Jews hated the Samaritan because the Samaritans were hated by Levites and Jesus was trying to say that your enemy can be the one making the right choices. Also a priest, ignored the man. This story shows that even a priest, whose job it is to follow God isn't always right.
<b>M</b>	<b>Meaning</b> What do you think the author was trying to say to their community: About God? About people? The world?	Luke was trying to educate people on how to be compassionate and caring. "Go and do likewise" was the whole chapter summarised in one sentence. That was the sentence which Luke was saying directly on how to act.
<b>O</b>	<b>Our World Today</b> What do others, people of faith and people of no faith, think of this passage.	Today this story could be of a school bully in the playground helping someone hurt. This story still is about people helping others in need and shows just how a human should act to be a good person.

*Absolutely Outstanding*

# THE HERMENEUTICAL BOOK GROUP

Ms Katie Clemmey, Senior Lecturer in RE

The book group was a key way in which participants were supported during the main phase of data collection for the project. Timed to last one hour each, the book group meetings were focused around themed sets of reading. Questions were drawn up and sent out in advance so that the participants could consider their thoughts and be ready to take part.

Sessions were organised to take place during agreed evenings once every few weeks and made use of an online collaboration tool. This enabled the participants to 'chat' online using video and audio, interacting with each other and with one of the researchers.

In terming the sessions a 'book group' the aim was to provide an open environment for discussion relating to the academic texts the participants were encouraged to read as a way of deepening their understanding of hermeneutics. Readings were selected and organised into themes, taking the reader on a journey through some key texts. Just as for many other book groups, questions were a combination of structured and unstructured. On occasion the discussions strayed from the focus area into wider themes and concepts.

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The list below details the readings selected for the project, organised into the themes as they were used by the book group. Alongside each choice we have provided a brief summary of the key concept(s) explored in the text and an example question used to initiate discussion around it.

## BOOK GROUP 1

Harari, Y. N. (2011) *Sapiens*, London: Vintage, 2011, 25-41 (The Tree of Knowledge).

This text introduced the importance of stories and narrative to the participants, highlighting the way in which these promote and affect our cognitive abilities. Stories shape us as humans, they have power. The way that we share them facilitates co-operation in humans and promotes common understandings.

Question: In what ways do stories have power?

Levy, S. M. (2008) *Imagination and the Journey of Faith*, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1-20 (Why Imagination Matters in the Journey of Faith).

This selection asked the question why some people ask transcendent questions when others do not. It considered the different experiences people have of stories and how this can affect our interpretation and how they shape our imagination.

Question: Might the imagination to ask transcendent questions be seen as a (God-given) talent that some have and others do not?

Levy, S. M. (2008) *Imagination and the Journey of Faith*, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 74-102 (Meeting God in the Story Told).

In this text the reader is asked to consider the way that good stories make us think, prompting us into a dialogue with the words of the text and allowing the reader to transcend their experience, transforming them in the process. It also considered the way in which what is not said in texts allows space for the co-creation of meaning.

Question: Is what makes a really good story the fact that it has a spiritual impact on the reader and enables them to grow in some way?

Wansbrough, H. (2010) *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, London: T&T Clark, 167-177 (Lectio Divina).

Are reading and study of a text the same? This choice asked participants to consider how they might be different but complementary in understanding Scripture. It also warned of the dangers of taking short sections of Scripture out of context and of focusing too much on particular areas of emphasis.

Question: How important is it to read the 'whole' as opposed to focusing on selected passages or sections?



## BOOK CLUB 2

Lundin, R. (1992) *Interpreting Orphans: Hermeneutics in the Cartesian Tradition, The Promise of Hermeneutics*, by R. Lundin, C. Walhout and A. C. Thiselton, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1-61.

The orphans in this choice of reading refers to the way in which some might argue that a text should be approached with a mindset as though we were 'beginning history anew'. It argues that this division runs through much of contemporary hermeneutical debate. For Lundin, interpretation is a form of human action that can never be context-free.

Question: Is it possible to approach a text with an 'orphan mindset'?

Walhout, C. (1992) *Narrative Hermeneutics, The Promise of Hermeneutics*, by R. Lundin, C. Walhout and A. C. Thiselton, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 65-90.

This text explores the question of whether it is possible for the 'true' meaning of a piece of writing to be there, in the words, inert, for the reader to uncover or whether meaning is something more. Walhout asks whether texts are instruments of action, not just objects? By using fiction writing as an example Walhout argues that reading is an active process in which words have varied meanings for the reader and for the author.

Question: Can a text have a meaning separate from or independently from its author?

Thiselton, A. C. (2009) *Hermeneutics*, Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1-34 (*The Future of Hermeneutics*).

A great place to begin to understand what is meant by hermeneutics. This provides background to hermeneutics more widely and also specifically in a Biblical context. It explains how multi-disciplinary approaches might be used to 'establish bridges' between differing interpretations. It also introduces the term 'pre-understanding' – we all come to a text with a unique starting point – and argues that this is in fact a useful way of beginning the hermeneutical circle or spiral.

Question: Can we ever read a text as an object without putting something of ourselves into it?

## BOOK CLUB 3

Burge, S. R. (2015) *The Meaning of the Word: Lexicology and Qur'anic Exegesis*, Oxford: OUP, 1–32 (Words, Hermeneutics and the Construction of Meaning). This fascinating excerpt was an eye-opener for the group. It provides an introduction to the ways in which the reading of the Qur'an has been addressed within Islamic Studies. It gives an insight into the once popular 'dictionaries of the Qur'an' as well as the variety of tafsir (commentaries) that exist. In explaining this variety it asks questions about what the translator or exegete brings to their work and how important the recognition of this is for us as the reader.

Question: Must we accept that all translations are prescriptive?

Burge, S. R. (2015) *The Meaning of the Word: Lexicology and Qur'anic Exegesis*, Oxford: OUP, 1–32 (Words, Hermeneutics and the Construction of Meaning). This text brought us to a discussion of the problem of essentialism. In relation to Islam and the teaching of it within RE, it argues that we need to be more mindful of the simplifying of Islam to its 'essence'. In the context of our overall theme it gives a clear and accessible argument for the need for a hermeneutical approach to the teaching of religion, and especially Islam to ensure that pupils are aware of its internal diversity.

Question: Can we avoid the pitfalls of essentialism in RE?

## BOOK CLUB 4

Soulen, R. N. (2009) *Sacred Scripture: A Short History of Interpretation*, Louisville, Kentucky, USA: Westminster John Knox Press, 7-13 (How Many Senses Does Scripture Have?).

A short chapter focused on the recognition that historically, there has always been a recognition that texts can have more than one 'sense' in which they might be understood. It introduced the group to the concept of the Quadriga – four modes (or senses) in which we might interpret Scriptures, as well as debate over what other ways it might be possible to isolate 'senses' by which to ascertain meaning.

Question: Does the idea of a text having senses in which it can be interpreted resonate?

Thiselton, A. C. (2013) The Future of Biblical Interpretation and Responsible Plurality in Hermeneutics, *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics*, by Stanley E. Porter and Matthew R. Malcolm (Eds), Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 1-16.

In this chapter the participants were introduced to the use of transmissive and productive texts - the difference between open and closed pieces of writing. They also considered the possibility of reaching polyphonic understanding and concordance. Within this text was also a warning that writing cannot be endlessly interpreted, that stable cores should be identified to assist communities achieving a shared, and a better understanding of them.

Question: Is there a stable core of meaning to Biblical texts?

Dunn, J. (2013) Biblical Hermeneutics and Historical Responsibility, *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics*, by Stanley E. Porter and Matthew R. Malcolm (Eds), Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 65-78.

In this chapter we were asked to consider historical context and how this shaped and continues to shape a text for the reader. It reminds us of the limitations of our understanding of the historical and social context of texts as well as of any subsequent translations. In doing so it also gives recognition of the fact that our own act of interpretation is also historically situated and that we, alongside the text become part of an historical continuum through that process.

Question: Do we have an historical responsibility to a text?

## BOOK CLUB 5

Ratzinger, J., Pope Benedict XVI (2007) *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, London: Bloomsbury, 2007, ix – xxiv, 183-217 (Forward and Chapter 7, The Message of the Parables).

Ratzinger provides us with examples in this text, of ways in which one might read Scriptures such as the Parables of Jesus. He begins with the historical fact of the texts and the events that they tell the reader of. But equally, he reminds us of the limited understanding one can gain from this and instead argues for a more collaborative approach. An approach in which one recognises that there are deeper meanings to be uncovered by engaging in them, rejecting the idea of one single meaning. For Ratzinger, reading the Bible requires movement on behalf of the reader from something known towards something previously unknown.

Question: Can a believer believe on multiple levels?

Hahn, S. (2010) Introduction, *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, ix-xxiii.

A section of this Study Bible gave the book group a chance to almost be in the role of pupils in learning afresh about the Bible. Our discussion of this focused on a quote 'the way in which we read the Bible, in turn, will determine what we "get out" of its sacred pages'. This provided a useful way to bring together many of the previous texts.

Question: Does 'the way in which we read the Bible, in turn, determine what we "get out" of its sacred pages'?



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